

Guillaume Musso

LOST AND FOUND

a novel

Excerpt translated by Jeremy Leggatt



Nothing serves so effectively as a novel to prove that reality is a botched job, that it fails to satisfy human desires, appetites, and dreams.

Mario VARGAS LLOSA

A request from the author before we begin:
Keep the secret – don't tell your friends
how this book ends!

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The Night It All Began

*We must resign ourselves to it:
at the most important crossroads of
our life, there are no signposts.*

Ernest Hemingway

December 2006

It's Christmas Eve in the heart of Manhattan...

It had been snowing steadily since early morning. Numb with cold, "the city that never sleeps" seemed to be living in slow motion, despite its seasonal riot of illuminations.

Traffic was surprisingly fluid for the eve of a holiday, with a thick layer of powdery snow and fluffy drifts making any movement difficult.

At the corner of Madison Avenue and 36th Street, limousines nonetheless came and went at a steady rhythm. They dropped off their passengers at the front steps of a handsome Renaissance-style mansion, site of the J. Pierpont Morgan Library, one of New York's most renowned cultural foundations. Today it was celebrating its hundredth birthday.

Inside, tuxedos, sumptuous gowns, furs and jewelry flowed up the marble stairway. The crowd converged on a glass-and-steel wing extending the building in order to anchor it painlessly in the twenty-first century. On the top floor, a long corridor led to an enormous room where some of the Library's treasures were displayed in glass cases: a Gutenberg Bible, illuminated medieval manuscripts, drawings by Rembrandt, Leonardo da Vinci and Van Gogh, Voltaire's and Einstein's letters, and even a scrap of paper napkin on which Bob Dylan had written the lyrics to *Blowin' In The Wind*.

As latecomers found their seats, the audience gradually fell silent. For this evening, part of the lecture hall had been set aside to give a few privileged guests the chance to hear the violinist Nicole Hathaway play Mozart and Brahms sonatas.

There was applause as she came onstage. Elegant and composed, Nicole was around thirty years of age. Her Grace Kelly bun gave her the look of a Hitchcock heroine. Acclaimed all over the world, she had played with all the great orchestras, and since her first record, recorded when she was sixteen, she had been heaped with money and fame. Five years before, a tragedy had devastated her life. The media followed the event closely, and her name was now a household word, reaching far beyond the closed circle of music-lovers.

Nicole bowed to the audience and cradled her violin. Her classical features perfectly matched the elegant patrician surroundings, as though the violinist were absolutely at home among all these hoary engravings and Renaissance manuscripts. Raising her bow, she at once went into the attack, creating an intimate dialogue between bow and strings, which she maintained for the duration of the performance.

Outside, snow fell steadily in the cold night.

Inside, however, only comfort, luxury and refinement.

On a street corner less than five hundred yards away, not far from one of the Grand Central subway entrances, a sewer covering shifted and slowly rose to reveal a shaggy head with vacant eyes and battered features...

Hoisting the black Labrador cradled in his arms to sidewalk level, a man emerged and painfully heaved himself upright onto the snow-covered asphalt. He crossed the street, zigzagging as he staggered through a storm of angry honking.

Emaciated and shaky, the homeless man wore a soiled, threadbare coat. When they saw him, pedestrians stepped up their pace or gave him a wide berth.

He was used to it. He knew that he scared people; he knew that he stank of filth, urine and sweat.

He was only thirty-five, but he looked fifty. Once he had had a job, a wife and a home. But that was long ago. Now he was a wandering shadow, a ghost wearing rags and muttering incoherent words.

Dragging himself along rather than walking, he had trouble staying on his feet. He staggered from side to side.

What was today's date? What time was it? What month?

He no longer knew. Everything was jumbled up inside his head. The street lights seemed dim. Icy flakes borne on the wind slashed at his face like razor blades. His feet were frozen, his stomach hurt, his bones felt on the point of breaking.

It was two whole years since he had left human society and burrowed down into the city's entrails. Like thousands more of the homeless, he found sanctuary below ground, in New York's vast network of subterranean subway, sewer and railroad tunnels. But god-fearing citizens and tourists alike could take heart: the city's zero-tolerance policy toward vagrancy had borne fruit, and Manhattan had been scrubbed

superficially clean of its indigent denizens. Yet a parallel universe teemed far beneath the glittering skyscrapers – a New York of human jetsam huddled in the dark burrows, hollows and cavities below. Thousands of “mole-people,” society’s outcasts, fled aggressive police tactics to live underground amid rats and every kind of filth.

That was the way it was.

The man fumbled in his pocket and pulled out a bottle of rotgut spirits. Of course he drank. What else could he do?

One long gulp, then another.

To forget cold, fear, filth.

To forget his old life.

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Nicole Hathaway’s bow rose and fell one last time. For the space of two beats a heavy silence hovered over the audience – the famous silence that follows Mozart, the silence music-lovers consider is *still* Mozart – before it broke into sustained applause.

The violinist took a bow and accepted a bouquet of flowers before crossing the room to hear effusive congratulations from her audience. But their enthusiasm failed to deceive Nicole, who knew that her performance had fallen short. She had played these sonatas with faultless technique, laser clarity and great energy.

But not from the heart.

Already anxious to leave the stage, she went mechanically through the ritual of handshakes and compliments as she took occasional sips from her champagne glass.

“Want to go home, sweetheart?”

She turned slowly toward the comforting voice of her boyfriend. Eric, a business attorney who had more or less shared her life for the past few months, stood beside her, a glass of vermouth in his hand. Permanently attentive, he had been there for her at a time when she needed him.

“Yes. My head’s spinning. Take me home.”

Anticipating the answer she gave him, he hurried to the cloak-room. He emerged bearing a heavy coat of gray flannel, which she slipped on and buttoned up to her chin.

The party was just getting under way. Saying a hasty goodbye to their hosts, they walked down the imposing stairway to the front door.

“Let me call you a cab,” said Eric. “Then I’ll walk back to the office for my car and see you at home.”

“Let me come with you. It’s only a five-minute walk.”

“Are you kidding? The weather out there is horrendous.”

“I need to walk and get some fresh air.”

“But it could be dangerous.”

“Since when is a three-hundred-yard stroll dangerous? Besides, you’re here.”

“Whatever you want.”

They were silent as they emerged on to the sidewalk and headed through the biting cold at a brisk pace. There was hardly any traffic as they crossed Fifth Avenue, going west. Falling in heavy flakes, snow continued to settle on the city

Now the car was only a hundred yards away, on the other side of Bryant Park. In warm weather, that shady area is a luxuriant green enclave, ideal for taking the sun, picnicking, or playing chess by the fountain. But tonight it looked sinister, pitch-dark, deserted...

“GIVE ME EVERYTHING YOU’VE GOT – NOW!”

Nicole let out a short gasp.

Beneath the bright street lights, a knife briefly glinted in the man’s hand.

“I SAID GIVE ME YOUR MONEY – ALL OF IT!” ordered the man with the knife.

Immensely broad-shouldered and powerful, he could have been any age. His shaved skull protruded from a dark windcheater that fell to his knees. His face, punctuated by two tiny eyes glowing with an insane light, was split from scalp to chin by a raw, swollen scar.

“FASTER!”

“OK! OK!” Eric finally said, pulling out his billfold. Without being asked, he also offered up his Breitling and his phone.

The man took them and drew nearer to Nicole to grab her bag and her violin-case.

Nicole tried to hide her fear, but she could not bring herself to meet his eyes. She screwed her own eyes tight shut. As a hand prepared to rip away her pearl necklace, she began to recite the alphabet backward as fast as she could. Just the way she did it as a child to dispel her night-time fears.

“Z Y X W V U...”

It was all she could come up with to keep her mind focused until this moment would be no more than an ugly memory.

“T S R Q P O...”

The man would be gone soon. He had what he was looking for – money, a phone, jewelry...

“N M L K J I H...”

He’s leaving now. Killing us would do nothing for him.

“G F E D C B A...”

But when she opened her eyes the man was still there – and pulling his arm back preparatory to stabbing her.

Eric saw the blow coming, but fear glued him to the spot. He had not made the slightest move to protect her.

Why wasn't she surprised by his behavior?

In any case, she had no time to move a finger. A powerless spectator, her eyes were fixed on the blade flashing up toward her throat.

Was this what her life came down to? Promising beginnings, a shining middle, followed by this descent into hell, into this squalid end that had burst upon her without warning, leaving the curious sense that she was the heroine of an unfinished story...

It was strange. People sometimes said that at the moment of death your life flashes before your eyes. But all Nicole saw was a single scene: a beach stretching into the distance, empty except for two people waving happily in her direction. She could see their faces clearly. The one closer to her was the only man she had ever loved, the only man she lost hold of. The second was her daughter – a daughter she felt she had failed to protect.

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I'm dead.

No I'm not. Not yet. Why?

Out of the blue, someone had thrown himself at her attacker

A homeless man.

At first Nicole thought he was another assailant. Then she realized that the newcomer was trying to rescue her. In fact, the knife thrust intended for her hit him squarely in the shoulder. Despite the wound, he was quickly on his feet again and driving the mugger back. He wrenched the knife from the man's grasp and wrested his loot from him. Then the two men began swinging punches at one another, until the homeless man finally got the better of his much bigger adversary. With the help of his dark Labrador, he turned the attack into a headlong retreat.

But victory had levied a price. Utterly exhausted, Nicole's rescuer collapsed in the snow, his face resting on the frozen sidewalk.

Nicole was already rushing to his side, losing one of her polished pumps on the way.

Kneeling on the smooth ice beside the man who had saved her life, she noticed splashes of blood on the snow. Why had this vagrant taken such risks for her?

"Maybe we should slip him a twenty to show our appreciation," Eric suggested. It was an unfortunate remark. Now that the danger was over, the lawyer had recovered his self-assurance. But his suggestion could not have been timed worse.

Nicole gave him a look of contempt.

“Don’t you see that he’s hurt?”

“I’d better call the cops, then.”

“He doesn’t need the police, he needs an ambulance.”

She struggled to roll the stranger over on his back. She put her hand on his bleeding shoulder and looked into his stubble-darkened face.

At first she did not recognize him. Then he opened feverish eyes and stared intently at her.

Something snapped inside her, and she felt a rush of blood to her head. She could not yet tell whether it was pain or relief, whether it was menace or hope that had materialized from nowhere in the night.

She bent her face closer to his, as if to protect him from the swirling flakes that were beginning to coat both of them.

“What are you playing at?” asked Eric anxiously.

“Shut that phone and go get the car,” she told him as she rose to her feet.

“Why?”

“This man...I know him.”

“What do you mean, you know him?”

Nicole did not answer him. “Help me get him back to my place,” she said.

Sighing heavily Eric shook his head.

“Christ, who the hell is the guy?”

Staring into the night, Nicole let several seconds go by before responding.

“It’s Mark, my husband,” she said.